

El Salvador: Managing the Military

Introduction

The Army's willingness to back democratic institutions has been vital to the stability of civilian government in El Salvador since 1984. Most recently, impartial military support for constitutional civilian procedures was reemphasized during orderly legislative and municipal elections on 20 March 1988 that resulted in the ruling party's surrendering its majority control of the legislature for the first time in Salvadoran history. Nevertheless, long-term Army backing for an elected government is far from assured, particularly should key officers perceive dwindling US military assistance as reflecting declining US interest in institutionalized civilian rule in El Salvador and elsewhere in the region.

This paper examines the working relationship between the military and elected officials in El Salvador, their attitudes toward each other, the key issues that affect the relationship, and pressures within the political parties and the armed forces that could derail what has until now been a prescription for stability. Finally, the paper assesses the prospects for continued Army backing of the civilian government and the implications for US interests.

Civil-Military Relations Under Duarte

The key question President Jose Napoleon Duarte faced following his election in 1984 was the degree of tolerance the military would have for civilian government. Fifty years of repressive rule by the military—which exercised authority primarily to protect the interests of the upper class—had exacerbated tensions between the small, monied elite and the large, disenfranchised worker-peasant class, which profited little from the economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s. As political polarization increased and became more violent, El Salvador's military regimes resorted to political killings and official intimidation—Duarte was himself a victim of military torture and exile in the early 1970s—to maintain control.

By 1980 the international legitimacy and domestic credibility of the political process in El Salvador were seriously eroded, and the newly organized guerrilla fronts were seen by many intellectuals and the working class as the only alternative to continued government repression. The installation of an elected Constituent Assembly in 1982 to replace a military-installed junta marked the beginning of the US-nurtured move toward democratic rule that culminated in Duarte's election.

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guerrillas during Operation Montecrosa, which began in May 1987, Duarte signed the Central American peace accord. [redacted] indicates the President considers such initiatives less risky when they follow military successes because the officer corps is buoyed—and distracted—by its accomplishments and less likely to focus on political issues. [redacted]

Military tolerance for civilian government has been encouraged by the recognition that US military assistance—as well as Duarte's willingness to dedicate a large portion of domestic spending to support military operations—has been the deciding factor in gaining the upper hand against the insurgency. Salvadoran officers admit privately [redacted] that periodic temptations to intervene politically are tempered by the knowledge that such a move most likely would result in a cutoff of US military aid and training. Similarly, we believe senior officers recognize that public acceptance of decisions to devote a larger portion of the domestic budget—up to 25 percent since 1984—to security has been facilitated by the fact that the decisions have come from an elected civilian government and not a military regime. [redacted]

Civilian Perceptions of the Military

Despite success in getting the Army to acquiesce to the authority of Duarte's administration, [redacted] indicates that the President and leaders of his ruling Christian Democratic Party have periodically become suspicious that the armed forces harbor significant numbers of anticivilian hardliners. They also have worried that rightwing political parties and conservative businessmen retained undue influence among these officers and might foment unrest within the military. [redacted]

[redacted] for instance, that a retired officer belonging to one of the rightwing opposition parties was lobbying among active-duty military officers for a coup. [redacted] that another extreme rightwing group had raised money to buy support among the military for ousting Duarte. Nevertheless, the High Command publicly continued to deny any involvement in politics, and the officer corps privately rejected these rightist attempts to draw the military into political intervention. [redacted]

In our judgment, four years of relatively consistent military backing in the face of repeated economic and political crises have reassured Duarte and his administration that the Army High Command has little interest in undercutting the government. In fact, the High Command has often taken the side of the Christian Democrats—we believe more to ensure stability than out of fondness for the ruling party—in policy confrontations with rightwing politicians and the business sector. [redacted]

[redacted] his support has repeatedly angered conservatives, who feel their interests are no longer being protected by the officer corps. [redacted]

The military's willingness to back the democratic process and remain largely aloof from politics has reinforced positive attitudes among civilians toward the armed forces. Besides allowing the country's first elected center-left civilian government to take power in 1984, the Army, [redacted] strongly opposed efforts by the conservative parties to characterize the 1985 legislative elections as fraudulent and blocked efforts to overturn the results. The military's acceptance of the decisive conservative victory in the March 1988 legislative and municipal elections, on the other hand, is ameliorating long-standing rightwing suspicions that the High Command has sided only with the ruling party. [redacted]

Residual Military Unhappiness

Despite the High Command's commitment to democracy, many within the armed forces continue to view civilian government as poorly administered, rife with corruption and incompetence, and plagued by petty political bickering among the political parties. [redacted]

[redacted] that civil-military relations had reached their lowest ebb since Duarte's election following a three-month boycott of the Legislative Assembly by the conservative parties, a rightwing business strike, and Duarte's unilateral decision not to renew suspended state-of-emergency legislation. Subsequent improvement in relations with the Christian Democrats [redacted] came largely because most officers believed that no other political party had the popular support or leadership to run the country more efficiently. [redacted]

The Monied Elite and the Military

In our judgment, one of the most noteworthy changes in Salvadoran society over the last several years has been the deterioration in the relationship between the military and the country's most affluent and conservative families. Traditionally, the military ruled the nation on behalf of the oligarchy. Monied families often provided financial support for cadets from humble backgrounds, and as they rose through the ranks, these officers were expected to serve their patrons' interests.

The 1979 coup—which brought to power a group of reform-minded officers who saw breaking the power of the oligarchy as necessary to prevent the country from falling to the burgeoning guerrilla movement—illustrated that an important section of the military no longer equated its interests with those of the upper class. The new attitude was underscored in 1980 when the military initiated the first significant agrarian reforms by sending troops to remove wealthy landowners forcibly from their plantations and to seize their banks.

The privileged class continues to support the armed forces as a barrier to Marxist insurgents coming to power. Nonetheless, reports that

many rich Salvadorans hold the military in contempt and argue that it is one of the country's most serious problems. The wealthy maintain—often publicly—that the officer corps has no interest in a quick end to the war because that would result in an end to US military aid, a reduction in the size of the Army, and a loss of officers' perquisites and opportunities for corruption. Further, although few rich apply, they argue that the High Command rejects officer candidates from the upper class, fearing they will come to dominate the institution. In our judgment, these attitudes are generally motivated by political frustration growing out of the belief that the military has cast its lot with Christian Democratic reformists.

military attitudes toward the monied elite are equally negative. Many officers consider the upper class greedy and unpatriotic because of its tax evasion and opposition to new tax measures intended to fund the war. Many officers attribute the refusal of wealthy families to allow their children to join the Army to narrow, self-serving interests.

Many hardline officers believe that Duarte and the Christian Democrats have used military support as a political shield during confrontations with the right-wing opposition—making the military appear a tacit ally of the ruling party. For example, that, following the imposition of an unpopular economic reform package in 1986, Duarte warned conservatives in a private meeting that the military would not tolerate attempts to incite public disturbances. indicate that the right wing believes that Duarte can count on the Army to support him during political crises.

that hardline officers also feel civilian leaders do not sufficiently value the opinions of the military on political matters of national importance. Many officers view the Army's relationship to the administration as collegial rather than hierarchical and resent any effort by the civilians to implement policy without prior consultation. When Duarte has been sensitive to these concerns, friction has been minimized. In 1986 and 1987, for example, the President enlisted military support before implementing controversial economic austerity and tax packages.

ARENILLAS

ESTE AÑO LOS SOLDADOS
PUEDEN VOTAR

UNA PUBLICACION DE ARENA



Figure 1. Rightwing political cartoon showing General Blonden (standing) and President Duarte (see above).

Blonden: "This year the soldiers can vote."
Duarte: "No, please! Don't vote for me."
This cartoon uses a play on words. In spoken Spanish, Duarte's comment can also be interpreted to mean, "Don't throw me out."

Assessing Key Issues

Despite generally good working relations between the civilians and the military, several issues remain potentially troublesome. The scheduling of a presidential election in 1989 and a changed political climate since the ruling party lost control of the Legislative Assembly in March 1988 may provoke changes in several sensitive areas that could create fissures between the Duarte government and the officer corps.

Military Funding

Increasing political pressures from the public for more government spending on social programs and rural development projects are conflicting with the military's requirement for continued funding to fight the insurgency. We believe Duarte has so far been willing to earmark a large portion of the budget to the military—in hopes of buying military loyalty—in the belief that political costs were low because his party's traditional worker-peasant constituency had no realistic alternative to supporting the ruling Christian Democrats. The electoral success of the rightwing political opposition in the March elections, however, demonstrated that Salvadoran voters are impatient for improved living standards.

Human Rights

Duarte's efforts to end human rights abuses are a continuing irritant in civil-military relations. While allowing the Army wide latitude on internal issues and counterinsurgency operations, the administration has insisted on the strict observation of the human rights of prisoners and civilian noncombatants. Duarte also has blocked the appointment of officers suspected of continuing human rights violations to positions of increased responsibility.

for instance, that during the summer of 1987 Duarte prevented the assignment upward of a battalion commander notorious for his antiadministration views and suspected of summary executions of suspected insurgents.

Moreover, the armed forces continue to resist government attempts to investigate human rights abuses by military officers. Indicates the Army has systematically protected or covered up for officers alleged to have participated in political killings earlier in the decade. One group of middle-level officers—the powerful military academy class of 1966, known as the *Sinfonica* *tanda*—has been particularly active in opposing efforts to pursue investigations of officers' abuses. When one *Sinfonica* colonel was arrested for involvement in a kidnaping-for-profit ring in mid-1986, the group successfully pressed

The Sinfonica Tenda—A Study in Cohesion

The military academy class (tanda) of 1966—nicknamed the Sinfonica (symphony) because of its large size in comparison with other classes of the time—is remarkable for its cohesiveness, influence, and the number of key Army commands it controls.

[redacted] that the Sinfonica is extremely protective of its members and has close ties to Minister of Defense Vides Casanova, a former instructor at the academy. This group of colonels controls four of six brigades, all eight military detachments, and four of the six General Staff positions.

In our judgment, the Sinfonica is potentially a major obstacle to the consolidation of civilian authority; paradoxically, it also has been a key aid in maintaining the civilians in power. Many of its officers were labeled extreme rightists [redacted] in the early 1980s, and some are alleged to have been involved in rightwing death squad activity and coup plotting during that period. Critics of the Duarte administration repeatedly have pointed to the failure of the government to prosecute these officers as

evidence of continuing military links to the death squads. In addition, [redacted] has indicated that Sinfonica members are more inclined to political involvement and more critical of civilian rule than their superiors.

We believe, however, that the Sinfonica has at the same time been instrumental in maintaining military support for the Duarte administration.

[redacted] indicates General Vides Casanova uses his close ties to the colonels of the Sinfonica to explain civilian policy decisions, lobby for their support, and pressure Sinfonica members to calm potentially dissident officers. In addition, the 1966 tanda has so far been willing to act as an intermediary between the civilian administration and High Command on the one hand, and junior and middle-level officers on the other. [redacted] indicates this group of colonels—although often cynical about democracy—seems content, for the present, with civilian government.

[redacted] for his release.

[redacted] Duarte repeatedly has found it necessary to block Sinfonica efforts to bring the security services—which have become increasingly moderate and are generally more responsive to civilian efforts to investigate human rights cases—under more direct Army control.

Economic Conditions and Public Disorder

Declining economic conditions, in particular in urban areas, have given rise to political pressures from both the right and left that periodically spark concern within the armed forces. Early last year, for example, officers were critical of Duarte's inability to end a rightwing legislative boycott provoked by a proposed economic and tax reform package. Leftist demonstrations and urban violence have caused friction between a civilian government concerned about its international image and determined to prevent police overreaction and a military establishment intent on preventing

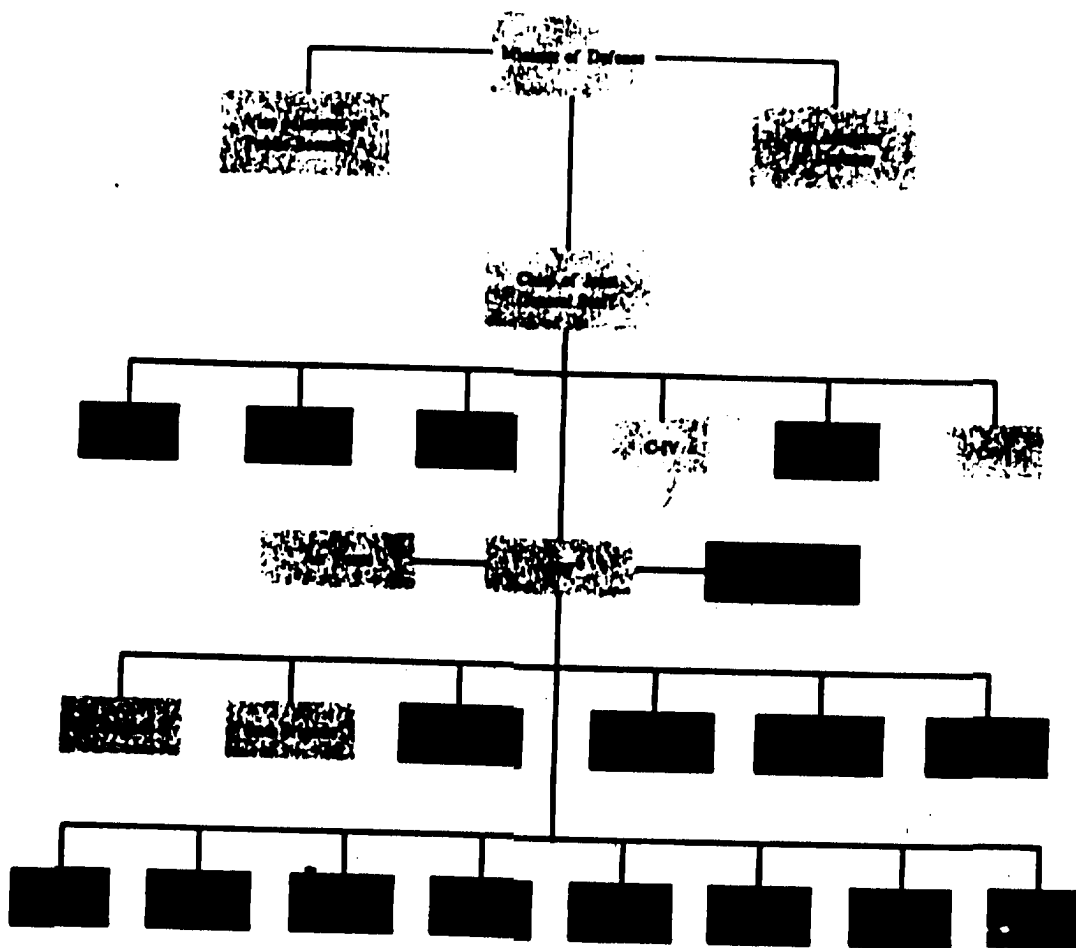
guerrilla urban activities.

[redacted] indicated that [redacted] the reluctance of the police to use force to prevent street violence by Communist front groups caused significant discontent among hardline officers. This [redacted] suggests such police inaction also caused many voters to turn against the ruling party during the March elections.

Maneuvering for the Transition

In our judgment, the defeat suffered by the ruling Christian Democrats in the March 1988 elections will engender significant anxiety within the armed forces. Before the election, most observers believed Duarte's party was the one most likely to win the 1989

Commanded by a Sinhala Tamil member



* There are three subordinate commands, but none belong to the Southern Front.
* There is no Army commander but the Army is commanded by the Chief of the General Staff

Preserving Equities Within the Military

We believe the High Command recognizes the need to begin to replace key officers—some of whom have held their jobs since before Duarte's election and are anxious to retire—before the 1989 elections. Their efforts have been stalled, however, because Duarte has insisted, [REDACTED] that top leaders such as Generals Vides Casanova and Blandon remain in their positions until the end of his term. The President apparently believes no other officers command equal respect and authority, and he is probably concerned that establishing a close working relationship with their replacements during his remaining year in office would be difficult [REDACTED]

Nevertheless, pressures to retire senior officers continue to mount. The limited opportunities for promotion to general officer has caused some impatience among some senior field-grade officers whose careers are blocked by lack of movement of generals eligible for retirement. [REDACTED] that over the years Vides and Blandon—as they repeatedly interceded with officers during various crises between the civilians and the Army—lost much of their original credibility among the officer corps, which has come to view them as spokesmen for the civilian administration. Finally, in the midst of these mounting pressures Duarte probably recognizes that, if key personnel changes are made well before the election, he can play an influential role. He will want the High Command to choose moderate officers who support civilian rule rather than hardliners who might attempt to play a more assertive role in government policy-making. [REDACTED]

many of whom have returned from self-exile to live openly in the capital—have refused to sever their longstanding ties to the insurgency. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] has indicated increasing disaffection within the officer corps over the freedom of the left to participate in the democratic process while supporting armed groups trying to seize power through force. Further, some officers may fear that, if the legislature performs as poorly under the right as under the Christian Democrats, a disenchanted public may turn to the left. Army anxieties are tempered somewhat because the left—which chose not to run in the March 1988 elections—faces significant funding problems, remains disorganized, and seems unlikely to make a credible electoral showing in the near term. [REDACTED]

Outlook

In our judgment, the officer corps is likely to provide backing for a civilian government at least through the end of Duarte's final year in office. The evidence provided by the first four years of civilian rule indicate that the armed forces have established a firm working relationship with the civilians that is sufficiently flexible during periods of political instability

and crisis. We believe Duarte, viewing his relations with senior officers as a top priority, will continue to employ the techniques he has used to placate the military over the past four years. Thus, he is likely to remain generally aloof from internal military affairs, avoid policies that could be perceived as threatening to the integrity of the officer corps, and allow the military a relatively free hand in its conduct of the war.

We believe civil-military relations will continue to be tested in the period leading up to the presidential election. A contentious relationship between the conservative-dominated legislature and the executive—and the administrative inertia and increased political bickering that result—will reinforce doubts in the military about the ability of the civilians to govern. Although Duarte may attempt some bureaucratic housecleaning and administrative reform to improve his party's image before the presidential election, general preoccupation with preparations for the campaign will be a significant distraction from the business of governing, and military sympathy for civilian rule is not likely to be enhanced over the next year. Should the officer corps perceive the ruling party is headed for another electoral loss, senior and middle-level officers may become less inclined to bend to civilian executive authority as the Army positions itself politically for a conservative win next year.

In our judgment, political uncertainties will spur efforts by the Army to make key and long-expected reassignments among the High Command. By making such changes well before the 1989 election, senior officers can ensure continuity within the General Staff during the presidential transition, as well as preserve the principle of military preeminence in internal personnel matters. Finally, a timely shuffle of the General Staff would avoid leaving the new president to face wholesale and potentially contentious and destabilizing personnel changes.

Another critical test for civil-military relations will come following the 1989 election. While the military probably will accept any candidate who wins in a free election, the new president will need quickly to establish good relations with key senior officers and reassure the military that he intends to continue Duarte's

Coup Factors

In our judgment, a military coup, while always possible, is not probable.

It is suggested that only civilian political interference directly threatening the integrity of the military institution, or inept policymaking that undermined the constitution, would produce a coup. So far, the Duarte administration has kept well within safe bounds on these two issues. Indeed, the only serious coup rumors have come about not as a result of unhappiness over allegations of corruption or lack of movement on serious economic reform, but when the Duarte administration attempted to influence military promotions or attempted negotiations with the guerrillas that the military perceived might lead to powersharing.

We believe the military is further constrained from launching a coup by the realization that it probably would cause a US aid cutoff, as well as seriously disrupt military resources from the war.

For instance, that the police—staffed by less politically active police officers—are loyal to Duarte and would be likely to resist a coup attempt. In addition, the strategic First Brigade, located in the capital, has traditionally been headed by politically neutral or pro-Duarte commanders who would more likely follow the lead of the General Staff than dissident officers attempting a coup.

Few officers would associate with a coup that would result in military or police casualties, or that would divide or weaken the military institution.

policy of periodic consultation. In addition, the new president will have to improve on Duarte's weak administrative performance and make some effort to demonstrate serious intent to correct bureaucratic lassitude, incompetence, and corruption. We believe the military would accept a rightwing victory, despite fears of political restructuring of the officer corps through wholesale reassignments and forced resignations.

As in the past, antipathy for civilian rule is most likely to come from field-grade officers and their subordinates. The degree to which unhappiness at the middle level can be controlled will depend largely on the ability and willingness of senior officers—many of whom may be relatively new to their jobs—to intercede on behalf of the civilians. By almost all accounts, field-grade officers—in particular the class of 1966—have enough cohesiveness to act in unison should they perceive a civilian threat to internal military autonomy or determine that policies of the new president were seriously undermining political stability. Given these conditions, we believe that many junior officers would look to the *Sinfontes* to take the lead in confronting the General Staff with demands for changes in civilian policy or in launching a coup.

Implications for the United States

We believe that perceptions of a declining US commitment to foster civilian government in the region would prompt the officer corps to become more involved in politics. [redacted] indicates that reduced US funding for the Nicaraguan insurgents and for El Salvador has caused the Salvadoran military to question US resolve in Central America. If public frustrations mount over declining US assistance, the pace of the war, a stagnating

economy, and continued civilian ineptitude, a consensus could well build within the middle and upper classes as well as officer corps to blame Washington, arguing that US policies no longer serve the national interest. Some might point to Guatemala as an example of a Central American country that defeated an insurgency—albeit under an extremely repressive military government and at an enormous human cost—with no significant US assistance.

A coup, even if disguised by the retention of a civilian figurehead as chief of state, would be widely perceived as a defeat for US policy in the region. In our judgment, the nascent Central American democracies would view such a development as a failure of US resolve and policy, and the militaries of [redacted] might feel less constrained to launch similar coups reflecting their frustrations in dealing with civilian institutions.